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Into The Jungle, Or: The Charade of Student Government

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The interior of the UT Student Government assembly room

Room 2.102 of the Student Activity Center, the UT Student Government's conference room, is in desperate need of a home makeover. Dismally monochromatic, it does not draw favorable comparisons to more noteworthy boardrooms of power, like those of the United Nations, which is almost certainly the look the designers were going for. Unfortunately, the layout of the room demonstrates a complete lack of ambition. There's simply no character to the place; the impression given is neither that of a professional and storied hall (e.g. the chambers of the US Congress) nor a smoke-filled, Blofeld-ian nightmare (e.g. FIFA headquarters). The lonely mahogany podium backed into a corner is hardly the kind of dais a great statesperson would demand for an engaging and insightful speech. The view from the inexplicably divided window is not of the verdant scenery here at the university, not of students engaging in lively conversation or dutifully studying or playing Frisbee (this, I assume, is what comprises the life of the archetypal UT student though I myself have never participated in any of these activities — I'm told they're all enjoyable and meaningful experiences) but of an equally dull building. The white, plastic chairs afforded to members of the general public are uncomfortable and confining, and their vogue foldable tables simply can't be used because of how heavily crowded the chairs are. And it is one of these chairs that I find myself seated in on Tuesday, March 6th, waiting for the Student Government legislative assembly held every week.

A lean, bespectacled staff member of the SAC — an “orange shirt” as I affectionately call them — is assessing the room in preparation for the meeting. He briskly tucks in chairs, checks the lights, and tests the microphones. There's something very hypnotic about a person performing a task they've done countless times before — just watch chefs chop carrots or priests preparing for mass and you'll see what I'm talking about. It's a routine executed masterfully that appears purposeful to a spectator, but has lost all novelty or significance to the performer, merely “muscle memory” that requires no thought or reflection. Satisfied with his work, he murmurs indistinguishably into his walkie-talkie and moves to exit the room. His eyes fall upon me for the first time. He asks me if I'm here for the meeting and I explain to him that I want to figure out what's going on. He smirks. “Good luck. Must be great to be in Student Government right about now.”

An Electoral Extravaganza

The backdrop of this whole episode is the heated election for “executive alliance” — legalese for presidential ticket — to head the student government at the University. It has been a toxic cycle rife with controversy and

vitriol, with the two most serious campaigns, Colton-Mehraz and Guneez-Hannah, suffering vicious verbal harassment and threats. The election has been covered exhaustively, and so I won't cover previously trodden ground. The principal question I had as this election progressed, a question no one seemed interested in answering, was put simply: What does student government even do?

It's a question I never really considered answering growing up. My student government exposure in middle and high school didn't make matters any better. To me, student councils were merely avenues for the most oleaginous and self-serving popular kids to pad their resumes. They all ran as anti-establishment candidates no matter how mired they were in the bureaucracy, claiming that a vote for them would mean a vote for meaningful change — the previously ineffectual student government would after their victory become an actual force on campus, firmly representing the voices of students. It was a bit taxing hearing the same empty rhetoric year after year after year. I always ended up voting for the least attractive and most unpopular of options in a brother-in-arms, class solidarity sort of way; predictably, they never won. Indeed, the only interaction I did have with the student government in high school did not end well: I attempted in vain to coax the student president to give me a few minutes during the schoolwide rally to promote myself for the upcoming dance. In common parlance, this activity is a “bribe.”

The “Investigation” Begins

But entering college means you have to start taking up responsibilities, or so I'm told. And so I resolved to finally find out the answer — I owe at least that much as a “citizen” in this “civic society.” As such, I turned to the first resource one turns to in the 21st century for answers to these questions: the Internet. This was my first mistake.

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Part of the SG Supreme Court website. Those buttons redirect back to this page.

I tried looking into the various UT Student Government websites. They are, to put it mildly, atrocities. The designs are incredibly unintuitive, and the pages, like virtual Winchester mystery houses, are scattered with links and buttons that lead nowhere. The only site of value is the Google Drive archive of legislation up for consideration by the assembly — remarkably, I found that I was able to edit these documents, a power that really should not be bestowed upon me. The bills aren't pleasant reads, written in Byzantine language that make them incomprehensible for the uninitiated. I've always fashioned myself an authority on sucking up hot air with meaningless prose — it's a tactic I frequently employ for English classes, lab reports, and professional emails. But it appears I have much to learn from the UT Student Government.

Anatomy of A Bill

Take for instance, the piece of legislation enthrallingly titled A.B. 23: Amending the Code of Rules and Procedures to Clarify the Application Process for Special Projects and Address Rollover. The description of the bill is just as perplexing. Section 1 declares:

“Amend Chapter 2, Article III, Section 3.2, the Code of Rules and Procedures for the University of Texas at Austin Student Government with the addition of as follows:”

First, note the needless muscle flexing. One wonders what code of rules and procedures the “University of Texas at Austin Student Government” would modify, other than its own. This bill is just one of innumerable measures that concerns itself with internal changes to the Student Government — amendments to procedures for how it operates. In other words, there are no political consequences of this bill.

Let's skip ahead to Article V, Section 5.5:

“Funds may be shifted between the general allocations funds and appropriations funds. The Internal Financial Director may review and revise these line items. The Financial Affairs committee may review these decisions and vote to alter a decision by a vote of simple favorable majority.”

A prime example of how these bills raise more questions than they answer. What's the difference between allocations and appropriations? And what is this mysterious Financial Affairs committee?

Here's Section 2:

"This bill shall be sent to the Dean of Students, the Deputy Advisor to the Dean of Students and the Vice President of Student Affairs. This bill shall take immediate effect until and unless one or more of these entities objects."

In other words, if any actual adult objects to any part of the bill, it's wholly useless. This is an important caveat in most of these bills.

And the proverbial icing on the proverbial cake, Section 3:

"The Assembly Clerk shall update the Code of Rules and Procedures and provide an electronic copy to the Communications Director, who shall update the SG website accordingly."

Given my personal experiences navigating the SG website, I can safely conclude the Communications Director needs to step up his game.

Open Mic

And so, with no other recourse, I am left sitting in a dreary conference room on a Tuesday evening, waiting for an assembly meeting. As the representatives slowly begin to file into the room, I note their general appearances. They're exactly the sorts of people I expect to see in student government; clean-cut, gregarious and overburdened — they're all bemoaning the mountains of work they've thrown upon their own shoulders. They pick up one of the agenda packets from the stack as they shuffle to find their designated seats but most don't read it, another example of that "muscle memory." A tall man in a blue coat, the only adult, also walks in — a supervisor, perhaps? There's no time to find out, because the meeting has commenced.

Most of the team from the incumbent executive alliance is absent; they're touring Washington, D.C, with the AIPAC conference on their itinerary. The same goes for the legislators. There's not enough for a quorum to be called, meaning *no bill can be voted on*. So the traditional roll call is flouted and it's on to Open Forum, the five minute window granted to the public — that's me — to pose questions to the government.

They inexplicably applaud me as I stroll up to the podium. I introduce myself and rather meekly explain my concerns about transparency to the assembly. Of those who are paying attention, there are a few detectable eye rolls and knowing really-can-you-believe-this glances at one another. I finish my schtick and am promptly applauded off the podium and back into obscurity and, even worse, back into that cramped white chair. The Blue-Coated Man, sitting in the back near me, gives me a thumbs up — I can't tell if it's because he agrees with what I'm saying or if it's more of a participation trophy. The meeting then moves to bill deliberation.

As far as I'm aware, there are two kinds of bills that Student Government deals with. One kind is the unproductive internal shuffle as seen with AB 23. The other kind can best be described as "statements of support." This week the assembly looked at a bill in support of releasing final exams earlier, a resolution in support of altering polling locations on campus, and one in support of enforcing a UT provision for — the key word here is support — support for actions and policies that are out of the hands of Student Government and are ultimately decided by the actual UT administration.

As the assembly deliberates over these bills — recall that they cannot actually vote on any of them — one of the G-men walks up to me. He introduces himself as the Internal Finance Director with bemused irony, as if in anticipation of the derision that might come with announcing yourself in this manner. Regardless, he didn't strike me as the nefarious bureaucrat I had imagined; here was a beaming civil servant who appeared to listen intently to what I had to say. Offering me his email, he promised to answer all my questions as soon as possible. I can't help but wonder if this was, like the orange shirt doing his troubleshooting, just part of *his* routine.

Til Gabriel Blows His Horn

By the time he's done with me, the deliberation on the last bill has come to an end. The meeting appears to be over — the assembly members stand up and all turn around towards the room's exit. The Blue-Coated Man quietly slips out of the room. As I stand up, the representatives begin to sing. It is apparently the custom to sing "The Eyes of Texas" at the end of every Student Government meeting. Given that I hardly know the anthem, I just stare dumbfounded back at them.

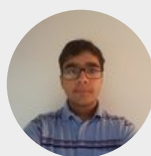
It is at this point that all my doubts about Student Government are confirmed. Behind all the controversies and elections and applause and bills, it's just a giant paper tiger, the Shere Khan of a jungle teeming with strange and foreign animals like the "Communications Director" or the "Financial Affairs Chair." And maybe I'm just late to the party here, and most people have already realized this. Maybe that's why less than 25 percent of the student body can be bothered to vote during elections, for doing so would only legitimate a

totally worthless enterprise. Maybe people look at the resolutions of support passed by this body, quorum or no quorum, and see them for what they are: vacuous feel-good statements. Maybe they see tuition rates increasing, no serious punishment for abusive professors, or disappointing sexual assault statistics and see no meaningful pushback from the Student Government. Maybe in the absence of any kind of representation, and in the face of these crippling systemic problems, maybe if you're a student who's been assaulted or struggling to make ends meet or feels unsafe at your own university, all you can do in the face of these problems is kick or scream or spray paint, just so that maybe someone — *anyone* — will see and hear you. And the worst part of it is the students in that drab room, who are singing along to "The Eyes of Texas" as they collectively stare at a blank white wall, for all their passion and motivation, can't see that they're there because they're just scapegoats, because it allows a university to say it "listens" to students while continuing its own agenda, because it's convenient.

As this article-turned-narrative-turned-diatribes goes to publish, the campus nightmare that was the Student Government election for the next executive alliance has come to a close, with the Colton-Mehraz team claiming victory, to which my anti-establishment colleague remarked, "The Machine Always Wins." The planks of their campaign are interesting and may benefit the student body — though you won't find anything addressing issues like tuition hikes. Perhaps they will enact meaningful policies that will markedly change the lives of students on this campus for the better. Perhaps they will transform the impotent Student Government into a body that has clout. Perhaps the student body will finally be bothered to care about this institution. Indeed, publications like *The Daily Texan* have marveled at the highest turnout for an election, a whopping 29.5 percent. How impressive. My sneering aside, maybe UT's Student Government has turned a leaf with this latest election — only time will tell. Given my past experiences, though, I'm not holding my breath.

Campus

student government



ANURAG SINGH

Anurag Singh is a freshman student studying computer science at UT Austin and is an avid reader of news. He also is part of KVRX, the radio station at the University, and is the host of Not Fake News, a news program on the station.

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Feb 3

The Failures of Privatization

A presentation slide with a light gray background. At the top center is a dark blue rectangle containing the text "Mar 10" in white italicized font. Below this, the title "The Nationalization of Student Government Elections" is written in a large, black, serif font, centered. At the bottom of the slide is a solid dark gray horizontal bar.

Mar 21

The Economics of SG Voting: Why Every UT Student Should Vote

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